

BINARY OPPOSITIONS IN ROBERT FROST'S THE ROAD NOT TAKEN (1916) AND THE ARMFUL (1928)

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ABSTRACT

A unidirectional thinking might make one lose many other or other experience. One of the strategic options not to lose so lies in the 'structuralist' approach. Structuralism is that probe with which, the reader is both delighted and challenged by the nuances of language. It allows the readers an opportunity to travel beyond the conventional dualisms that direct the thinking. Comprehending the process of destabilizing the binary oppositions can make one, a competent reader to understand the basis of literary aspects and combinations in the text. It helps in developing potent layers of meaning for a more refined analysis, through a better classification of the thematic features of a text. It also assists in realizing the significance of maintaining vital cultural ideas, and at the same time, rising above cultural stereotypes that may be conflicting to keep pace in the progressing world. It also prepares the reader to look through the 'given' constructs in the world, to distinguish between appearance and reality.

The present paper attempts to look at this concept of 'binary oppositions' in the poems of Robert Frost namely; The Road Not Taken and The Armful.

KEYWORDS: Binary Oppositions, Structuralism & Deconstruction

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INTRODUCTION

Sometimes, a unidirectional thinking might rob us of many other or another experience language can give us. Structuralism offers a strategy to probe into the nuances of language to be provoked and delighted. It invites the readers to go beyond the conventional or standard dualisms that direct our thinking through logo centric language. The entailment in these oppositions is mutual, and they are concealed in beliefs and principles that place a cultural hierarchy on one part of the binary structure. This idea goes against the structuralist and deconstructionist strategy, which seeks a mutual necessity of both the oppositions for a structure to exist.

The present paper attempts to look at this concept of 'binary oppositions' in the poems of Robert Frost namely **The Road not taken and the Armful.**

Robert Frost (1874-1963) was the four time Pulitzer winner American poet. Frost's usage of a modern idiom and directness in expression lends his poems uniqueness. His poems carry economy, yet never fail in showing the deeper meanings of life. The poems taken up for study in this paper with their lucid descriptions remain rich fields of binary oppositions. A journey through the poems, holding these binary opposites helps the reader travel beyond the surface to comprehend the sublimities of artistic values.

An understanding of the subversion of the binary oppositions has the potential to make one a competent reader in understanding the basis of literary aspects and combinations of the text. It helps in developing potent layers

of meaning for a more refined analysis through a better classification of the thematic features of a text. It also makes one realize the significance of maintaining key cultural ideas and to rise above cultural stereotypes that may be conflicting to keep pace in the progressing world. It prepares the reader to look through the 'given' constructs in the world to distinguish between appearance and reality.

THE BACKGROUND

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of literary structuralism. It had influenced linguistics, sociology, anthropology, philosophy and other fields. Structuralism bases itself on the concept of viewing texts as a system of parts that are interrelated. Therefore, we understand that systems have a structure, the elements in the structure and their positions are determined by the structure and the meaning of the text is actually supported by the relationships of these structures.

Ferdinand De Saussure (1857-1913) in the early twentieth century introduced the concept of structuralism, in his work and soon it was applied to other fields of study. Saussure's study based itself on **signs** in linguistics. According to him the abstract system of language was 'langue' and the substance, one was 'parole'. He supported the view that language was 'arbitrary' that is there is no 'natural' relationship between the 'signifier' and the 'signified'. The crux lies in the understanding that a sign is not established by the relationship to what it refers and it seems to be a matter of convention that settles down in a culture. The concept of 'arbitrariness' is not a new one and had been part of Aristotle's thinking as observed in his idea that "there can be no natural connection between the sound of any language and the things signified" (Richards: 32). Saussure's selection of the words 'signified' and the 'signifier' helped to show "the distinction which separates each from the other" (Saussure 1983: 67) the concept that is; 'the signified' exists at the mental level and the word at the physical level. The elements of language in Saussure's exposition "are not objective facts identified by their inherent properties, but purely "relational" entities; that are their identity as signs are given to them by their relationships of differences from and binary oppositions to, other elements within the system." (Abrams: 295). These elements may result in 'an illusion of reality', but have no truth-value, nor even any reference to a reality existing outside the literary system itself." (Abrams: 296)

Therefore, according to structuralists, what takes a prominent stance is the analysis of language and one of these approaches is binary opposition, which can be understood as differences between related elements in a particular system/text. Saussure's idea of meaning was 'different', that is, the differences between signs. John Sturrock says '... one-term languages is impossibility because its single term could be applied to everything and differentiate nothing; it requires at least one other term to give it definition. (Sturrock: 10) According to Saussure, the oppositional differences between signs were more 'negative' and he stressed upon these 'negative' oppositional differences and this shows the essence of binary oppositions in structuralism. Saussure opines that concepts are defined... negatively by contrast with other items in the same system. What characterizes each more exactly is being whatever the others are not". (Saussure: 115) The underlying network of such oppositions forms the basis of texts. The differences upon which, the linguistic units rest help us in emphasizing the meaning of the text and gaining a better idea about the operations of language.

Levi-Strauss (1908-2009) worked on the theory of culture and mind, which affected modern anthropology. He opined that the structural patterns, which included behavior and thought, are a universal concept applicable to all societies. According to him, the people in the world think in terms of binary opposites. The world moves based on differentiation;

that is; the classifications are made based on good/bad, life/death, and real/unreal and so on.

Ronald Barthes (1915-1980) was a literary theorist and critic, philosopher, linguist and semiotician. He carried forward the study of symbols and signs founded by Ferdinand de Saussure. Levis-Strauss and Barthes worked upon the concept of 'meaning' and forwarded the view that the meaning that we arrive at is not intrinsic in it, and is not autonomous but it is something that is 'constructed' or 'given'. It is a cultural derivation and it appears from an intricate relationship of ideas about the thing being discussed. The meaning is derived from one's understanding of things /ideas in culture and its opposite in culture. The differences in the opposite ideas in culture are the binary opposition. For example, sentences like "She jumped with ecstasy and held the trophy that she had won in the dance competition. *The wrinkles that showed her eighty years of life really didn't matter.* The first half of the sentence will make many imagine the woman to be young. The general given construct here is that, a person has to be in to dance and so on. The power of cultural ideologies comes into play and it reiterates a value chain established by the culture that shows the stereotypical ideas attached to women.

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) analyzed structuralism as a method to understand the philosophy of language and metaphysics of language comprising a system of signs. Derrida's ways of thinking influenced the deconstructive literary criticism. One of the procedures, which take the center stage, is the study of binary oppositions such as "speech/writing, nature/culture, truth/error, and male/female" (Abrams: 69). The aspect of difference as stressed in structuralism became significant in the deconstruction theory. The theory of deconstruction has its origin in structuralism, but it also differs in terms of the aspect of the interpretation of texts. The structuralist interpretation of texts is..." too static and unchanging. In contrast, the post-structuralists view texts as fluid, dynamic entities that are given new life with repeated readings... thereby providing an ongoing plurality of meanings." (Dobie: 143)

DISCUSSIONS

Robert Frost's *The Road not taken* continues to give us multiple 'choices' for interpretation. This makes the poem even more interesting from the point-of-view of a structuralist approach. The readers come across several binary oppositions in the poem. I line 1 and 2, there is the opposition of possibility/restriction. *Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, /And sorry I could not travel both.* 'One traveler' cannot travel both. The poet brings forth a tension in the opening lines of the poem that continues throughout.

The binary oppositions, conformity/nonconformity and illusion/reality gain focus. If looked at from the point-of-view of the binary opposition of conformity/nonconformity, it shows the speaker making a bold move in not conforming to the path opt chosen. The choice of the less trodden upon path seems to display an individualistic in decision-making and of the ability to comprehend the 'better claim' of the other path. The uniqueness displayed in the choice of taking that path, shows another binary opposition of heroism/cowardice. The word I' repeats itself *Two roads diverged in a wood, and I- I took the less travelled by, / and that has made all the difference* (18, 19 20) the repetition could suggest the heroic aspect, trust in self and individualism. Now the word *difference* assumes a positive connotation and the *sigh* could be one of relief after a long successful struggle. Heroism is the privileged one between heroism and cowardice or ordinariness/extraordinariness. Frost uses this to turn it 'upside down' by selecting words that actually break the belief that trying to be different does not always yield one result. Towards the end of the poem, Frost uses the word '*sigh*' which could mean an expression of sadness or relief. By not extending it, Frost leaves it ambiguous. The binary twofold expression leaves us with two layers of understanding that points to another binary of happiness/sadness. The resultant *And that has made all*

the difference (20) could mean that the speaker finally shows us the binary opposition of reality/illusion, in which he understands that opting to take an untraveled path is making the right choice which will make the speaker stand out in his journey of life. However, towards the end, we find him 'sighing' and sounding as if he/she finally regrets the decision. It is a reversal of thought. Frost could also be challenging the idealist/realist binary opposition that prioritizes the ideology that taking a new path will always keep one ahead against choosing the ordinary path chosen in the past by an infinite number of people. It is a reversal of the idea that deciding after thinking might always land one in a comfortable domain. . Frost's intelligent wordplay of '... has made all the difference' (20) creates an ambivalence which further gives rise to another binary opposition of free will/ destiny or determinism. The opposition also points to the usage of words in the lines *I shall be telling this with a sigh/ Somewhere ages and ages hence:* (16,17). The usage of the words *ages and ages* seems to make the physical self of the speaker deathless, but in reality, nobody can live through *the ages*. Alternatively, it could also be the notion that one has to or forced to create the belief in oneself and the world that the path taken was a more challenging one than the other taken up by ordinary people was.

Frost puts forward this thought in the beginning of the poem about thinking before choosing to make a seemingly right choice. He creates an assumption of the right choice with a careful selection of words like '... could not travel both', 'long I stood', and 'and looked down' (Lines 2, 3, 4) to show the nuances in making a decision. Later he presents another set of words towards the end of the poem like 'sigh' and 'And that has made all the difference' (lines 16,20). Even the title of the poem *The Road not taken* has an opposition because Frost speaks of the road, he has not traveled, whereas the poem is about *The Road travelled* (italics mine). Therefore, the poem seems to shake the binary opposition of right choice/wrong choice.

Another binary opposition in the poem is that of clarity/ambiguity. The speaker has clarity about the journey about to be undertaken. However, there is doubt about which way to choose. The paths seem to be clear; one that seems to be used and the other not so much opted for *And perhaps having perhaps the better claim.* (7) The word 'perhaps' is also a pointer to a certain degree of doubt. At the same time, the speaker finds the path *As it was grassy and wanted wear.* (8) Then, after some consideration the speaker finds *Though as for that the passing there/Had worn them really about the same,* (9, 10) giving rise to an ambiguity. The binary opposition, which puts 'clarity' on a higher pedestal, is dismantled with a degree of ambiguity that the reader is left with. Frost disturbs the internal linguistic unity of the poem by using ambiguity. It could also be a deliberate move by the poet to topple presumptions.

It seems that Frost's poem deconstructs itself. Though the speaker *took the other,* () he also discloses that "both that morning equally lay / In leaves no step had trodden black" (11-12). He says ". . . *The passing there / Had worn them really about the same*" (9-10). If both were the *same*, then where is the prominence of judgment before making the choice? The speaker says *Oh! I kept the first for another day* (13) and immediately says *Yet knowing how way leads on to way, / I doubted if I should ever come back* (14, 15) The binary opposition of past/future (in a sense of a retrieval of the past) comes into play in these lines. One can never return to that particular moment lost in time. One also cannot alter one's decision if the result goes against one's expectations. *Way leading on to way* could mean both the way as a method or a path that will pave its way to the future.

The Armful

Both; *The Road Not Taken* and *The Armful* deal with 'how to move ahead on life's roads. Both deal with making choices in life about what to 'take' and what to 'leave'. *The Armful* seems to be about a common act of balancing and

holding things and the difficulties involved. The binary opposition that is central to the poem is gain/loss. The speaker tries hard to hold everything *for every parcel I stoop down to seize/I lose some other off my arms and knee*, (1, 2). The term gain in the opposition becomes the privileged one. It continues to be so, as the things that are being held are *Extremes too hard to comprehend at once* (4). How much ever the speaker tries to hold all of them, they keep falling down. He *crouches* "... down to prevent them as they fall; / Then sit down in the middle of them all. (9, 10)

There are elements in the poem that contradict the hierarchy. The privileged term 'gain' presents conflicting meanings. The speaker says *I had to drop the armful in the road*. (10) Gaining or safeguarding is essential, but not to the extent where the process becomes unmanageable. The things held cannot be *comprehended at once*. Lines 5, 6, 7 and 8 contradict the hierarchy of the notion of gaining/holding/keeping. *Yet nothing I should care to leave behind. / With all I have to hold with hand and mind/ And a heart if need be I will do my best/ To keep their building balanced at my breast*. There seems to be a philosophical implication in the speaker's tone when he uses the words, nothing, care and leave behind. Humans in their eagerness many a time are carried away of holding on to many things and owning many things in spite of facing difficulties. Finally, it all has to be 'left behind' after death. These could be the *Extremes too hard to comprehend at once* (4) the extremes extend from the *hand, mind* and to the *heart*. The word *best* suggests that what the speaker had been trying to do by embracing things was only a 'better' option.

The word choice of *hand, mind* and *heart* suggests a shift in the perspective, which is from the physical to the mental state. Therefore, the concept of 'gain' in the binary opposition of gain/loss is replaced by *gains* in another sense of the word, which could be a meaningful gain in terms of permanence. The first line *for every parcel I stoop down to seize* (1) is finely balanced with the last line *and try to stack them in a better load* (12). The *parcel* in the first line is *seized* and the *load* in the last line is better arranged and better comprehended.

The word *try* in the line *And try to stack them in a better load* (11) becomes important that shows the difficulty in acquiring the ability to *stack* the 'right' ones. It seems to be a better arrangement but in another sense means arranging not the things but life itself so that it can be carried more gracefully. *I had to drop the armful in the road* (10) seems not to mean 'loss' but the eternal truth of mortality of humans who travel on the road of intransience. Loss in one sense becomes a significant gain that attempts to undermine the assumption of looking at *parcels* as only physical acquisitions.

CONCLUSIONS

Derrida says "deconstruction has nothing to do with destruction and that all the standard uses of the language will go on: what he undertakes is merely to 'situate' or 'rein scribe' any text in a system of difference which shows the instability of the effects to which the text owes its seeming intelligibility" (Abrams: 70). Thus, the process makes a reader, read more critically and honestly and offers a scope to discover new fields of study that might otherwise go unacknowledged. Deconstruction, which makes binary oppositions, one of its significant aspects, is not about overthrowing what is truthful or real, but is concerned with subverting illusions in language that appear to provide unquestionable universal bases for knowledge. It assists us to go beyond the obvious and challenge those policies of the society that continue to influence us with language that is filled with beliefs without absolute foundation. This conception of tracing the binary oppositions in the poems in context offers a productive and creative reading experience.

The Road Not Taken and *The Armful* with their sets of binary oppositions assist us in adjusting our lens to perceive the illusions that bind the world; the illusion of 'choice' in the former and the illusion of 'gain' only as a physical

acquisition in the latter. The binary oppositions are disintegrated only to be integrated into an organic whole, to leave the readers more enriched.

APPENDIX

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a wood
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

The Armful

For every parcel I stoop down to seize
I lose some other off my arms and knees,

And the whole pile is slipping, bottles, buns—
Extremes too hard to comprehend at once,
Yet nothing I should care to leave behind
With all I have to hold with hand and mind
And heart, if need be, I will do my best
To keep their building balanced at my breast
I crouch down to prevent them as they fall,
Then sit down in the middle of them all
I had to drop the armful in the road
And try to stack them in a better load.

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